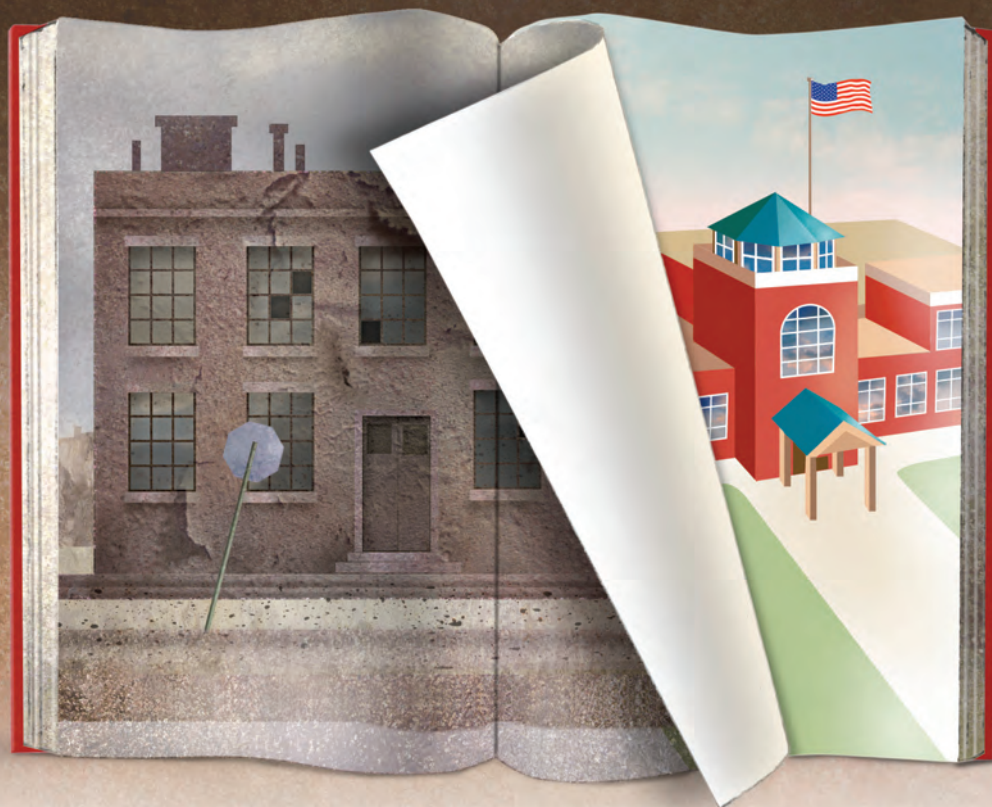


# Turning the Page on the Equity Debate in Education

## How to Give All Children a Real Opportunity



BY RICHARD W. RILEY AND ARTHUR L. COLEMAN

**W**e have entered an era of education reform with an extensive focus on how well we are preparing our students to succeed in postsecondary education and careers in a rapidly changing global economy, as well as to become thriving, contributing members in our

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democracy. Although these aims have recast our national conversation in some important ways, they have not altered fundamentally two of education's timeless questions: What should our education policymakers do to ensure that students of all backgrounds have the same opportunity to succeed? And, what can we do to ensure that our commitment to "education equity" is more than rhetorical flourish?

In this article, we attempt to address these issues with a specific focus on K–12 education, particularly by examining the question of resources—always central to discussions of equity. We do so, however, by urging that the "equity agenda" be understood in light of its potential alignment with the emerging education reform agenda, which is grounded in important principles of shared accountability.

We argue that we need to move from abstract notions of equity devoid of practical application to a world where high expectations and accountability are clear and we are meeting our resource obligations in light of those goals, particularly for students who

are currently underserved by our public schools. To achieve those ends, we believe that states and districts must marry the attention and transparency on student learning outcomes that have characterized much of our national conversation with corresponding attention and transparency on education investments. We highlight the need to ensure that we remain as focused on understanding the structure and flow of our investments as we are on the outcomes those investments produce. This essential attribute of success, we believe, fundamentally requires transparency and alignment of resources with the substantive policy foundations that research and experience suggest will be central to our efforts to drive improved student learning and significant education reform in our nation.\*

## The Challenges of “Equity” as a Reform Driver

We believe deeply in the idea that *all* children should have the best possible education opportunities and that our commitment is to ensure that each child can find and fulfill his or her potential. To achieve this aim, we believe that, for a number of reasons, a policy focus centered on “education equity” misses the mark.

First, the term “equity”—grounded in concepts of fairness and equality—has become one that is easily dismissed, largely because of its vagueness, as well as the perception among some policymakers that it is code for an unending flow of dollars. Correspondingly, the meaning of “education equity”—used in countless education policy conversations and found in hundreds of education mission statements—can be very different, depending on with whom you’re speaking. Thus, we believe it is important to bring a clarity and coherence to the concept as a way of helping policymakers and others think about what they’re really trying to do (or should be trying to do) when they pursue an “equity agenda.”

Second, as prevalent as attention to equity may be in certain arenas, that attention has not yielded a focus on key operational questions of *investment* anywhere near as intense as the current national focus on education *outcomes*. Investment tends not to garner as much attention in our national dialogue, even though the focus on outcomes often provides a glimpse into key equity issues.

Thus, for our goals associated with equity to have real, practical meaning for educators and the students they teach, we’ve got to do a better job of defining more clearly the operational objectives that will drive improvements in student learning. Especially in this time of shrinking budgets at all levels, we must ensure that federal, state, and local policies reflect key elements that will drive effective action toward these goals. If we’re going to do more with less, we had better be smart about how we’re going to do it.

Thus, to help guide policy discussions and advance more rigorous thinking regarding the strategies and investments we, as a

nation, should be making in education, we offer perspectives that center on the concept of resource alignment. This concept reflects some important thinking and work that have been under way for decades, while at the same time departing from more traditional equity concepts that often have yielded a simplistic “invest more money” bottom line. We believe that focused attention—and accountability—regarding resource alignment will help ensure that our education funds are spent in ways that are most likely to yield the positive education outcomes that we seek and need for *all* of our nation’s students.

## Substantive Policy Foundations

Informed by current education research and experience regarding the strategies and investments that really matter to generate positive education outcomes, a number of policy strands are front and

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center today in conversations about dramatically advancing education reform. The five principles briefly outlined below reflect that growing body of thought.

### 1. Ensure that every child has highly effective teachers, as well as effective school and district leaders.

All children deserve competent, caring, and qualified teachers in schools organized for success. This means that schools must have effective principals and other administrators who regularly collaborate with teachers, parents, community leaders, and others to improve student achievement—led by school boards who establish the critical policies and operational expectations from which all other actions flow. These are, ultimately, the foundations upon which meaningful education reform will take root, even as other key areas of policy must be addressed.

And those key policies must be focused on our most vital resource—our human capital. Our teachers, principals, and superintendents, and the staff who serve them, are the heart and soul of education. We’ve got to treat them as such—both in expectations and in support.

John Stanford, the late superintendent of schools in Seattle, used to say, “The victory is in the classroom.” For us to declare victory, we’ve got to ensure that our education system is providing the right kind of foundation.

The United States is losing an estimated \$7.3 billion a year to teacher attrition, and billions more are being spent to support teachers who are moving from one school to another in search of

\*Although beyond the scope of this article, this same policy focus also should be the underpinning of comparable early learning and postsecondary efforts—even as the central policy issues are distinct within each of those segments of the education pipeline. Importantly, and despite those key differences, we also must continue the work of breaking down barriers that too long have isolated early learning and postsecondary efforts from K–12 initiatives. We must, in short, work to connect effectively our analysis of investments and outcomes associated with early learning and postsecondary systems with those associated with K–12 reform. Only then will we have met the needs of our children through investments that are truly effective and cost efficient.



better working conditions.<sup>1</sup> And the turnover with respect to school principals and superintendents is similarly jarring. As a result of the enormous and constant turnover in faculty and school leadership, children—especially low-income children and children of color—are being held accountable for meeting standards that their schools are not prepared to help them reach. The children with the greatest needs are receiving the least. They often are taught by a passing parade of substitutes, their learning suffers, and the cycle of education inequality is repeated from one generation to the next.

We have an obligation to break this cycle. To close the student achievement gap, we must close the teaching-quality gap. But even the best teachers in the world can't do this job alone. In survey after survey, teachers



tell us they leave low-performing schools because of unpredictable teaching conditions, inadequate preparation for the challenges they face, and poor career prospects. To give teachers the support they need, we must focus on support that will develop and maintain school and district leadership; and we must change antiquated school staffing policies, outdated compensation systems, and perverse incentive structures that concentrate inexperienced teachers and unqualified individuals in low-performing schools.

The best teachers tell us that, if we want them to serve in high-priority schools, they need a great principal and at least four to six other talented teachers to work with them as a team in the school. To teach for America's future, we must develop a true profession in which teacher preparation, teaching practice, and the structure of career advancement are seamlessly linked and relentlessly focused on improving student learning.

## **2. Ensure that every child has access to challenging courses aligned with rigorous standards and the kinds of instructional supports necessary to help them succeed in those courses.**

By the time America's youth are supposed to don a cap and gown, a third of them have dropped out—a loss of 1.3 million students a year.<sup>2</sup> In many low-income high schools, the graduation rate is less than 50 percent. But even when we get young people into college, many of them drop out after their freshman year. We, in fact, have a deep-seated structural crisis in American education—

a crisis that is across the board, from school readiness to high school graduation to college completion.

Our national problem calls for national solutions—and we believe that the adoption by more than 40 states of the internationally benchmarked Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics reflects one essential step in the right direction. Along with these common core standards, we will need the right mix of summative and formative assessments that tell us not only how each school is performing but, just as important, what each individual child's academic status, needs, and growth are. Upon those important foundations, our state and local leaders then must ensure that we have aligned, rigorous, and supportive curricula that provide the basis for each child to learn to the high standards we have set—and we must make certain that

**Our accountability systems must focus more on diagnostic measures to support continuing improvement rather than on punitive sanctions.**

the appropriate supports are in place to help each student achieve his or her potential.

It is vital that the movement to raise achievement levels around a core of common standards and assessments not lead to standardization and the stifling of creativity in the classroom. Correspondingly, our accountability systems must focus more on diagnostic measures to support continuing improvement rather than on punitive sanctions. If our efforts promote fear, rather than embrace ways of achieving success, then we will have missed the mark entirely about how to raise standards as a foundation for driving improved classroom instruction and learning.

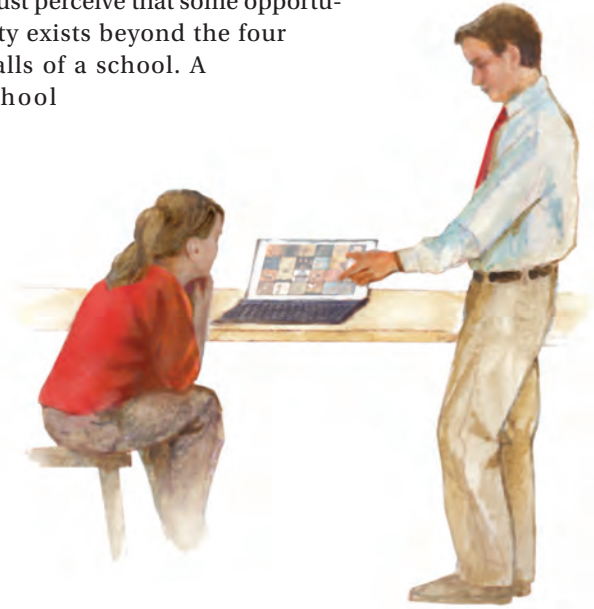
Indeed, our national commitment to raise achievement levels isn't merely about testing and accountability. It also is about raising our expectations for all children early on—and about engaging children in the excitement of learning. Many years ago, the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, in his book *The Aims of Education*, wrote, "the rhythms of education are in three stages: romance, precision, and generalization." "Romance," he says, "makes precision palatable. Without romance, precision dulls the mind and causes the student to focus on inert dead knowledge." We must not take the "romance" out of teaching and learning, even as we embrace an accountability focus that will challenge each of us to think differently and do better.

## **3. Ensure that every child has appropriate counseling and support to identify postsecondary and career options and how to pursue them.**

Teachers and principals can't do it alone, as we all know. School

counselors are an integral part of supporting students in their quest to pursue learning opportunities throughout their K–12 experience and beyond. Alarming, data reveal a national average of one counselor for every 457 students. In four states—Arizona, California, Minnesota, and Utah—the situation is even more dire, with a single counselor, on average, “serving” over 700 students.<sup>3</sup> And in most cases, postsecondary education is just a small part of the vast responsibilities of these counselors. Our students deserve better.

Each student, inherently possessing different strengths and interests, must perceive that some opportunity exists beyond the four walls of a school. A school



counselor, whose role is dedicated solely to providing the academic and financial information and guidance to the student and his or her family to navigate postsecondary options, plays a vital role in this conversation. In addition, school counselors collaborate with faculty and other staff members in establishing and following integrated practices that support student success in the school and in postsecondary pursuits.

**4. Ensure that every child is educated in a setting that celebrates learning, facilitates positive and challenging student and teacher interaction, and provides a safe, healthy space for all.**

The best standards, assessments, teachers, counselors, and curriculum are no guarantee of successful education outcomes, unless those elements come together in a school culture that embraces and celebrates learning (rigor and all) and in an environment in which all students, regardless of their background, feel safe, healthy, and secure.

Although often difficult to capture as a matter of policy or school operations, the essential culture of high expectations is, as we know, a key ingredient in the success of any school and any student. To advance that mindset, our leaders and teachers must ensure that they walk the talk of high expectations, every day and with every student. In today's increasingly diverse society, where students from multiple backgrounds can be expected to come together under one roof, we must ensure that our teachers and leaders exhibit the knowledge, cultural competence, and com-

mitment to help every student succeed.

Correspondingly, students must walk through the school door feeling safe, healthy, and secure. If they do not, then we cannot expect them to engage or learn, or to reach their individual potential. Whether we turn to the extensive and growing body of research that establishes the link between safe and supportive school environments and learning, or whether we turn to the headlines that make all too real the devastating consequences of school environments in which deteriorating conditions and fear are a reality, the need is obvious. We must work together around proven strategies to create safe, healthy, and welcoming environments and to respond effectively to acts of bullying, harassment,

**We must create welcoming environments and respond effectively to bullying, violence, and other disruptions—and do so beginning in the very early grades.**

violence, and other behavioral disruptions—and do so beginning in the very early grades.

**5. Ensure that schools connect with their families and communities to develop fiscally sound models for providing students with services that can make a positive difference in their education experience: improved parental involvement, health and counseling services, and extended-time opportunities with additional academic support and enrichment, among others.**

Finally, even if we have invested wisely and sufficiently in all the elements that are emblematic of school success and that, by extension, are most likely to lead to student success, the reality is that, in today's world, that still may not be enough for some students. Hundreds of thousands of students come to school each day with needs that require special support—a mental health specialist, medical and dental professionals, someone who can address a family crisis, an adviser who can connect the student with out-of-school education supports, a mature friend or caring adult to talk to, and more.

So, as we consider our education investments, let us not lose sight of the need for that outside-of-the-school support—academic or otherwise—that is indispensable to many students. The good news is that we increasingly see evidence of proven and cost-effective strategies that address the needs of the whole child. This comprehensive approach can help significantly reduce achievement gaps and improve student outcomes. If we are not attentive to our students for whom this kind of support is as vital as an effective classroom teacher, we will have failed in providing the support and enrichment needed to help our youth catch up, keep up, and get ahead.

## Key Policy Foundations: Enough?

These points are likely to strike a familiar chord. They reflect much of the thinking, dialogue, and consensus that have developed in education over the past several decades. However, that emerging consensus, particularly with respect to how we as a nation are addressing issues of equity, is not without its detractors.

Some have lodged criticisms that policies framed holistically (as these are) in the name of equity lose sight of the very students who continue to exemplify the greatest needs—low-income and minority students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Our view is that this framing does not diminish that

## Systems and Resource Alignment

With this backdrop, we then must ensure that we maintain a systemic focus on resource alignment as a central driver of meaningful education reform.

To elaborate, our experience over time has taught us that investments that are necessary foundations for this vision must include as much focus on the *process* of achieving success as on the substance of what success looks like. Premised upon a belief in the power of public education, well-developed policies will be little more than well-developed policies without: (1) a clear, sustained commitment to action; (2) the capacity to deliver on that commitment at the federal, state, and district levels; and (3)

Often missing from our numbers obsession is the contextualization of performance data. Without it, how do we know what the test scores mean?

focus. To the contrary, we believe that, with its holistic lens, this framework reinforces the attention on the key, systemic education areas (for which there must be, in the end, systemic solutions) that particularly affect these very students in need. This does not mean that there is not more to do as we address the specific needs of specific groups of students. Our point is, simply, that those efforts are unlikely to yield the effective and efficient results we seek if we do not pursue them in the context of a common policy framework that includes a focus on our investments.

At the same time, we recognize that there are policymakers and others who have resisted any mention of more resources for fear that it will lead to an unending stream of money, too much of which is spent in unproductive ways. We agree, as do many, that the question of resources cannot be one simply of dollars. But let there be no mistake: money matters, even though the answer to effective education reform does not lie simply or solely in spending more money. Indeed, with the current budget realities facing our federal government and most of our states, we are faced with the unenviable and undeniable challenge of how to do more with less.

Thus, our conversation must be open to new ways of assessing costs and striving for new efficiencies—all toward yielding better outcomes. In other words, we must frame the resource conversation in light of specific, targeted investments that are educationally sound and based on research and practice. We must do so while embracing meaningful, operational, shared accountability. And, in the end, we must be prepared to spend more in certain areas, even as we spend less in others.



an aligned, operational game plan for effective implementation.

The overlapping, intersecting federal, state, and local roles intrinsic to our system of federalism complicate the overarching questions of whether we are establishing policies in ways that recognize the unique power and leverage of each to advance meaningful reform. In other words, are we establishing, at each level, the correct (aligned) incentives to drive or at least encourage the most efficient and effective behaviors as part of our operational game plan for effective implementation?

Without an effective baseline for assessing the impact of investments in the five areas discussed above, and despite the best of intentions, we've done little but raise the prospect of seeing scarce resources go to waste and of missing opportunities to change the trajectory of so many children in need. Moreover, without a renewed focus on accountability regarding our investments, there is nothing to counterbalance today's (often context-less) focus on outcomes—and nothing to increase the odds of achieving our desired success. So, to ensure that we are meeting as effectively as possible the needs of all of our students, the central question to be addressed, with respect to each of the five areas, is this: *what, based on research and practice, are the key indicators of cost-effective investments that are likely to yield successful outcomes for all students?*

In other words, where and how should we be spending our

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limited resources?

To set the stage for meaningful policies that will address this question, we must enhance our efforts to collect—and effectively use—key outcome data. But this must be accompanied by collecting data on the education investments we are making. It is not enough just to track student learning over time and disaggregate school- and district-wide performance. To inform student and system-wide evaluation and make plans for improvement over time, state and district data systems also must track the investments being made to achieve those ends. This spotlight—merely one additional facet of meaningful accountability—can set the stage for ensuring the appropriate management of resources in light of performance over time. In particular, effectively designed and implemented data systems will focus on the key elements within schools, within districts, and within states that should be evaluated in light of potential synergies and efficiencies, avoidable redundancies and inconsistencies, and overall progress toward goals over time. Ultimately, such data will allow school systems to operate in much more resource-efficient ways—shining a light on the nature of our commitment.

Correspondingly, we must ensure that the strengths and limitations of the data we collect and report are well understood to avoid actions that would overreach or underreach. Often missing from our outcomes focus and numbers obsession is the contextualization of performance data. Without such contextualization, how do we know what the test scores mean? In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, with all of its strengths and flaws, there are lessons to be learned as we work to align federal, state, and local education systems around a common set of data points that should be foundations for, but not sole drivers of, institutional action. Context matters. Ensuring that our education leaders have sufficient resources to evaluate and re-evaluate key data points as foundations for meaningful diagnoses of the problems they face, *before* they take action, is a core element in any effort to advance the education goals we, as a nation, seek.

**T**hese observations will not be news to many who are heavily invested in the hard work of education reform. But they are important to articulate (and rearticulate) because such investments are often bypassed in conversations about what it will take to ensure that America maintains its international prominence and, most importantly, that *all* of our students graduate ready for college and career, enter the workforce with the skills needed by today's employers, and assume the mantle of fully-informed participants in our great nation. □

#### Endnotes

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